

Searching for the Seventies: Photographs from the Environmental Protection Agency’s DOCUMERICA Project

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In 1971, the newly established Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created DOCUMERICA, a federal government photography project born out of the nation’s environmental crisis. The photographers hired by the EPA took thousands of photographs depicting pollution, waste, and blight, but they were given the freedom to capture the era’s trends, fashions, non-environmental problems, and achievements as well. The result is an amazing archive and a fascinating portrait of America from 1972 to 1977.

came together when Hampshire returned home from the Army Air Corps after World War II and entered the University of Missouri. There, he took journalism courses with a professor who brought former FSA photographers Russell Lee and Esther Bubley to campus. Decades later, Hampshire recalled being “terribly excited” hearing Lee and Bubley talk about their experiences, and he pointed to those conversations as inspiring a hope to someday “do something ... comparable to the FSA and Roy Stryker.”¹

After graduating from Missouri in 1949, Hampshire took a job with the Fairchild Camera Corporation, promoting the company’s new photoengraving machine. In 1954, he left Fairchild to become a photo editor with *National Geographic*. Then, in 1961, after working briefly for the United States Information Agency, he moved to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), where he spent the next 10 years as a magazine editor and speechwriter. During his years with the FDA, he occasionally promoted the idea of a new documentary photography project based on the FSA, but with no success.²

In 1970, Hampshire’s chances of fulfilling his dream had improved dramatically. During the previous decade, beginning in the early 1960s, a broad critique of American society including



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DOCUMERICA was the brainchild of Gifford Hampshire. Born in Kansas, in 1924, “Giff” Hampshire grew up during the Great Depression. His father was an amateur photographer who would let his son observe as images magically appeared in trays of developing solution. After his father lost his job in the

mid-1930s, Hampshire lived on an uncle’s farm where he witnessed Dust Bowl scenes similar to those captured by photographers working for the U.S. government’s Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (FSA), directed by Roy Stryker. Those two influences



improving the nation's natural environment emerged from sources as diverse as scientists, White House policymakers, middle class women reformers, countercultural activists, and New Left radicals. By 1970, environmentalism was a powerful social movement and a potent political force. Journalists covered the movement extensively, authors wrote best-selling books warning of the dire consequences of environmental threats, and politicians on all sides appealed to voters with ecologically friendly ideas. High-profile environmental disasters such as the January 1969 Santa Barbara, California, oil spill and the June 1969

fire on Cleveland, Ohio's Cuyahoga River, gave substance to such worries. On April 22, 1970, those trends coalesced when millions of Americans celebrated the first Earth Day.³

The White House and Congress reacted to these heightened environmental concerns with executive and legislative action. President Richard Nixon established an Environmental Quality Council within the White House, sent Congress a 37-point message on the environment, and used his 1970 State of the Union to proclaim a "decade of environmental transformation." Congress passed a tough new Clean Air Act and

the National Environmental Policy Act. When Nixon signed the latter into law on January 1, 1970, it set up the EPA and gave it strong regulatory powers. In November, Nixon named William Ruckelshaus its first administrator.⁴

If the EPA's creation was a milestone in American environmental history, it also changed Giff Hampshire's career. In late 1970, he transferred from the FDA to the EPA and became deputy director of its Office of Public Affairs. Still fascinated with the FSA, he approached aides to Ruckelshaus with the idea of a photography project dealing with environmental issues. The staff members urged him to go to Ruckelshaus directly. The administrator was enthusiastic and asked Hampshire to head the undertaking, given the name Project DOCUMERICA.

In November 1971, Ruckelshaus and Hampshire introduced DOCUMERICA to the public and the media. The project would initially employ about 50 photographers to "pictorially document the environmental movement in America in this decade." Its photographs would establish "a visual baseline" of 1970s environmental images from which improvements could be measured. For example, DOCUMERICA photographers might "record ... current air pollution problems" and later re-photograph the same locations to chart progress. Other subjects would include water pollution, solid waste management, pesticide control, noise pollution, and radiation reduction. The photographs would demonstrate the "impact of the environmental problem," tally the social and economic costs of environmental change, document "the environmental movement itself," and, more broadly, "depict Americans doing their environmental thing."⁵

But Hampshire wanted even more from DOCUMERICA. He admitted that many assignments such as sewage treatment plants would prove to be "dull visual material." He wanted to capture what he called "the human condition" and how it related to environmental issues. Taking environmentalist Barry

Commoner's "First Law of Ecology" as the project's credo, Hampshire told his photographers that "Everything is connected to everything else." If DOCUMERICA was to be more than "a dismal record of environmental problems and what EPA and others do to solve them," its photographs needed to show "what the people of the nation do, or are, or think, or feel, or whatever it is that's 'connected to everything else.'" Such an expansion of the project's mission was crucial because the environmental movement was "changing lifestyles" and even "closing the generation gap with the emergence of a new environmental ethic."⁶

Consciously or not, DOCUMERICA photographers often took photographs that seem inspired by (or even imitative of) documentary techniques pio-

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neered by the FSA in the 1930s. But, as Hampshire pointed out, he was "no Roy Stryker." He hoped to avoid the "propaganda" for agency programs he noticed in many FSA photos, and he emphasized that his photographers would have the freedom they cherished to pursue the photographs they saw. Unlike Stryker, Hampshire did not send out lists of images he needed for the files, nor did he offer much in the way of guidance or critique. "I'm not saying," he wrote to a photographer, "that I cannot direct photographers into meaningful assignments ... I'm saying that I should not. I contend the best photography comes out of the photographer's intellectual involvement as well as emotional." He bragged that DOCUMERICA was "a photographer's project."⁷

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Ask students what images come to their minds when they hear "The 1970s," and write down a list of their responses. Next, divide students into seven small groups. Provide each group with one of the seven featured photographs. Ask them to study their image and respond to the questions on the photograph analysis worksheet available at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html. Lead a class discussion with students about their observations and conclusions. (Or, create an activity using the "Focusing on Details" tool with these images at www.DocsTeach.org.) Ask students to what extent these images are similar or different from the images that came to their minds when you first asked about their impressions of the 1970s.

2. Share information from the background essay with students about how DOCUMERICA was an early project of the Environmental Protection Agency and that it was influenced by the photography projects of the Farm Securities Administration in the 1930s. Show students some examples of the FSA photographs (available online from the Library of Congress at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>). Ask students to consider why government agencies might create photography projects. Encourage students to reconsider the seven featured photographs and write captions for each that convey their assumptions about the photographer's message. Next, direct students to www.archives.gov/research/search/ and invite them to compare their captions with the actual ones.

3. Ask students to generate a list of issues and/or themes revealed in the seven featured photographs. Assign small groups of 3–4

students to conduct research on one of the themes and compare their findings with information presented in their textbook's section on the 1970s.

4. Tell students that about 70 photographers worked for DOCUMERICA. Encourage students to select one of the following photographers and conduct research on him or her. Invite students to share their findings with the class.

Gene Daniels	Arthur Tess
Bruce McAllister	Leroy Woodson
Bill Shrout	Tom Hubbard
Frank Lodge	Bill Gillette
Lyntha and Terry Eiler	John H. White
Flip Schulke	Jane Cooper
Marc St.Gil	

5. Collaborate with your school's journalism teacher and ask students what issues or events that are a part of their lives might warrant a photography project to heighten public awareness. Create a list of their responses, discuss the merits of each as a class, and vote on one. Establish guidelines and requirements for student photographers to follow and make plans for hosting their work either on the walls of your school, in your school newspaper, or perhaps on your school's website. You might also encourage students to consider how social media sites such as Flickr and History Pin are venues for photography projects, and perhaps post theirs.



Also unlike the FSA, DOCUMERICA did not hire a permanent photographic staff. Instead, it contracted out assignments to local photographers who were paid \$150 a day plus film and expenses for brief assignments. Typically, these photographers proposed ideas after hearing from experts from the EPA who spoke to them about the environmental issues of their region. Hampshire and Rothstein would then meet with them and ask, "Well, what did you hear that set you off, as a subject?" As they completed their assignments, photographers sent their exposed film to Washington, D.C. It was processed in a New York City lab and then, shipped to the photographers who edited and captioned their slides. The slides went back to Washington, D.C., where Hampshire and his staff added them to the file. Photographers received full credit for their shots, and any rejected images were theirs. Accepted slides became government property and were in the public domain.

Over the next six years, Hampshire would hire about 70 photographers who would complete 115 assignments covering all 50 states. Assignments varied greatly. They could be narrow, general, or directly tied to the EPA's mission and needs. Many assignments dealt with different forms of pollution.

Some assignments came from the photographers' own interests, and the most successful DOCUMERICA undertakings produced photographs that were thoughtful, artistic, or provocative. Some photographers thrived on the freedom Hampshire gave them, brilliantly capturing aspects of American society in the seventies, such as the nation's growing cultural diversity.

Assignments and individual photographs were not always successful, though. Some photographers wanted more direction from Hampshire and floundered when he did not provide it. Others were saddled with mundane subjects and submitted repetitive images of smog, dead fish, traffic congestion, and effluence.

Hampshire's fascination with the Great Depression and the FSA had both benefits and drawbacks for DOCUMERICA. FSA photographers concentrated on images of 1930s rural poverty, sympathetically portraying its victims waiting for solutions provided by New Deal agencies. At their best, they offered powerful challenges to inequality and created an unmatched visual record of American society at a moment of crisis. Drawing on the FSA for inspiration, DOCUMERICA's photographers occasionally rose to this level of social commentary. But the 1970s



were not the 1930s. American society had become increasingly complex, fragmented, and diverse. Cities and suburbs, not small towns and farms dominated the American landscape; markets were global, the economy consumer driven, and the nation's population increasingly mobile. Moreover, the solutions proposed by EPA, and depicted in many DOCUMERICA photographs, "offered regulation, but not relief." As such, they only occasionally generated sympathy or moved a viewer to political or environmental activism. And while many environmental problems might be blamed on corporate practices or government inaction, others originated in American affluence and consumerism. Focusing on the harmful and destructive choices most Americans (including the photographers and Hampshire) made every day, cut uncomfortably close to home. With few exceptions, DOCUMERICA photographers did not critique America's consumer culture.⁸

DOCUMERICA's images of rural and small towns were especially problematic. America had long before become a nation of cities and suburbs, but owing to the FSA's influence, many of DOCUMERICA's assignments emphasized rural locations. The photographs from these assignments tended to be uncritical—even romanticized.



DOCUMERICA succeeded in several ways, despite its shortcomings. Its photographers took more than 20,000 photographs that geographically covered the entire United States and depicted in depth many of the issues facing Americans in the 1970s. The project's regional approach and its use of local photographers gave it a strong community focus—one that reflected the growing diversity of the American people.⁹ Hampshire's lack of interest in “official images” that celebrated the EPA gave some photographers the freedom they wanted to explore the unexpected, even if many others found his lack of direction frustrating. As the last large-scale federal documentary photography project of the twentieth century, its images deserve attention, greater visibility, and further study. DOCUMERICA's archive moves us farther from the stereotype of the 1970s as a time when “it seemed like nothing happened,” and allows us to glimpse the

nascent problems, issues, and changes that would shape our future.¹⁰ 🌐

Notes

1. Gifford Hampshire, untranscribed video interview with Bruce Bustard, Arlington, Virginia, November 16, 1998. Item numbers 64.67 and 64.68; Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, hereinafter cited as Hampshire/Bustard interview; Ken Light, *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000); Barbara Lynn Shubinski, “From FSA to EPA: Project Documerica, the Dustbowl Legacy, and the Quest to Photograph 1970s America” (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Iowa, 2009), pp.12-3.
2. Hampshire/Bustard interview; Light, *Witness in Our Time*, pp. 165-67.
3. Adam Rome, “‘Give Earth a Chance’: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties,” *Journal of American History* (September 1990): 525-554.
4. On Richard Nixon's attitude toward the environmental movement, see James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations, The United States 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 727; and Dennis C. Williams, *The Guardian: EPA's Formative Years* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1993), 19; William Ruckelshaus oral history interview with Michael Gorn, January 1993, EPA website at: <http://epa.gov/aboutepa/history/publications/print/ruck.html#bio> (accessed August 10, 2012); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in*

American Culture, Society, and Politics (Da Capo Press; Reprint, 2002), pp. 30-32.

5. Hampshire/Bustard interview; Light, *Witness in Our Time*, 167; Environmental News, February 1972, General Correspondence, 1972-1973 folder, box 1, series 412-M, Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, Record Group 412, National Archives and Records Administration. (DOCUMERICA records hereinafter cited as folder title, 412-series designation, NA); “Guidelines for Photographers,” January 1972, in Lyon folder, assignment 0012, 412-P, NA.
6. “Guidelines for Photographers.” Commoner was one of several popular late-1960s and 1970s authors, sometimes referred to collectively as “The Prophets of Doom,” who wrote books predicting worldwide environmental catastrophes of one sort or another. Commoner's most influential book, *The Closing Circle*, was published in 1971. In early 1970, he was on the cover of *Time*, which described him as “the Paul Revere of ecology.” See *Time*, February 2, 1970.
7. Hampshire/Bustard interview; James R. Gaines, “Documerica: Photographic Promises to Keep,” *Saturday Review*, February 26, 1972. Gifford Hampshire to Ken Heyman, July 17, 1973, in Heyman folder, box 4, assignment 0035, 412-P, NA; On Hampshire urging photographers to read Hurley, see Hampshire to Heyman, July 17, 1973 cited above; Hampshire to Wil Blanche, January 18, 1973, Blanche folder, assignment 0044, 412-P, NA, and Hampshire to Arthur Greenberg, April 4, 1973, in Greenberg folder, box 7, assignment 0082, 412-P, NA. On Hampshire wanting to avoid “propaganda,” see Light, *Witness in Our Time*, 170.
8. Shubinski, “From FSA to EPA,” pp. 21-22.
9. While DOCUMERICA's photographic coverage made an effort to include a variety of Americans, only a few DOCUMERICA photographers, notably Okamoto, Woodson, and White, were minorities.
10. Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s*. Carroll intended that his title be taken ironically.

BRUCE BUSTARD is a senior curator and is curator of the National Archives exhibition, “Searching for the Seventies: The DOCUMERICA Photography Project,” which will run at the National Archives Building from March 8 through September 8, 2013. **LEE ANN POTTER**, formerly head of education and volunteer programs for the National Archives Experience at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., is now the director of educational outreach at the Library of Congress. Potter serves as the “Teaching with Documents” feature editor for Social Education. The documents featured in this article are in the public domain and can be reproduced in any quantity. For additional information about the education programs of the National Archives, please visit www.archives.gov/education and www.DocsTeach.org.

Note about the photographs

The photographs featured in this article come from the Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, Record Group 412, and are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). They are among almost 22,000 color slides, black-and-white negatives, color transparencies, and photographic prints, as well as 20 boxes of textual material. The largest series of DOCUMERICA photographs—almost 16,000—have been digitized and are available through NARA's Online

Public Access at www.archives.gov/research/search/. You can locate the featured images by searching the following numbers:

412-DA-13397 (abandoned automobiles); 412-DA-2753 (children play in yard); 412-DA-12346 (Mary Workman holds a jar of undrinkable water); 412-DA-10848 (women suffrage day in Fountain Square); 412-DA-15786 (bride and her attendants in New Ulm); 412-DM-0153-19-21 (couple on Michigan Avenue); 412-DA-5999 (Lovell Street homes in jet aircraft landing pattern).